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Biotechnology Outreach Program for Germany

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Report Highlights:

Farmers in Germany, particularly those with larger operations in Eastern Germany, have shown a growing interest in using biotechnology despite public opposition against biotech foods. To explain the benefits and the advantages of using biotechnology in crop production, FAS Germany organized a week-long outreach program in June 2008 in conjunction with the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Information Program (ITP). The main feature of the outreach program involved a speaking duo consisting of a farmer from Iowa and a Bioindustry Project Manager from the Iowa State University. Together, they shared American farmers' experiences with biotech crops and gave presentations to farm groups, agricultural students, food and feed industry representatives, parliamentarians and Ministry of Agriculture officials.

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Program Objectives

In conjunction with the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP), FAS/Germany organized a week-long biotech outreach program which occurred between June 23-29, 2008. The goal of the program was to provide German farmers, agricultural students, food and feed industry representatives, Ministry of Agriculture officials, and the media an overview of the current green biotechnology situation in the United States and to share American farmers' experiences with biotechnology.

This year's biotech outreach program featured a speaking duo consisting of a farmer from Iowa and a Bioindustry Project Manager from the Iowa State University. Both speakers shared their experiences with biotech and also provided their personal assessments on the future of green biotechnology.

The following are highlights of the biotech outreach program activities.

- During a roundtable discussion with representatives from the German Parliament, German States, German Agriculture Ministry, and the farm and food industry, several participants inquired about the issue of coexistence in the U.S. and the status of new biotech events that are expected to be brought into commercial production next year. The biotech team explained that the issue of coexistence in the United States is not as contentious as in the EU, primarily because there is no distinction between biotech and conventionally produced crops. The team candidly acknowledged that due to the EU's policies regarding green biotechnology, U.S. exporters have increasingly focused their interest in the markets of Asia and South America for their exports. The team further asserted that if the EU does not modify its biotech policies, EU farmers could be adversely impacted by the introduction of new biotech events, particularly in feed products.
- At the German Agricultural Society (DLG) Field Days in Weimar-Buttelstedt, the team participated in a podium discussion about coexistence. A German farmer growing about 120 hectares of Bt corn and a representative of a feed mill, which offers special non-GMO animal feeds, also participated in the discussion. Questions focused primarily on technical matters. They responded to many questions asked by farmers visiting a biotech corn test plot at the show. There were also questions about coexistence between organic and biotech crop cultivation, dependency of American farmers on the biotech industry, and the economic advantage of biotech varieties over conventional seeds. An audience of about 30 people attended the discussion.
- During the program, the team also met with groups of farmers, agricultural students, academia, and a number of journalists. At a meeting with a large group of farmers near Dresden, a contentious discussion took place between environmentalists and farmers. The environmentalists, along with a beekeeper, expressed their concerns about resistance building, super weeds, and contamination of honey due to biotech corn pollen. Surprisingly, local farmers defended biotechnology and asserted that there was no scientific proof supporting the environmentalists' claims. Instead, they pointed out the advantages of the new biotech varieties.

The media picked up on the discussions and several articles were found in the Sachsen-Zeitung and the Main Post, two influential regional dailies in rural regions. The article in the Main Post appeared in a special feature on biotechnology, which included a report on the destruction of biotech corn fields, an interview with a leading anti-biotech beekeeper, and a positive editorial about biotechnology. In Wuerzburg, a radio journalist interviewed the biotech team for about one hour.

- In addition to farm visits and media interaction, the team also visited the agricultural-oriented Universities of Bernburg and Giessen. Professors at both universities are currently teaching classes in modern plant breeding technologies. The meetings in the universities focused more intensively on future products of the biotech industry. Questions ranged from the availability of drought resistant agricultural crops to the potential of the industry to provide biotech varieties which better fill the needs of the biofuels industry.

Summary

In summary, the team met with a variety of people who represented diverging interests, but who seemed to be very interested in actual farmers' experiences with multi-year cultivation of biotech seeds. As a testament to the success of the program, a professor from the Giessen University stated that, "if you have such a team again, you can come to my University whenever you want, you are always welcome." Receiving such a compliment leads us to believe that the biotech speakers accomplished the program objectives and made the outreach activities a success. Furthermore, during the many presentations and discussions, it was obvious that farmers operating larger farms, namely in the eastern part of the country, and agricultural students who have researched the issue, expressed a strong interest in the technology. On the other hand, it was also apparent that German politicians were taking positions against the technology or remained neutral to ensure that they did not stoke the ire of anti-biotech NGOs.